

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 730
INFO AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
AMEMBASSY DACCA
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY KABUL
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
CINCPAC
AMCONSUL BOMBAY
AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
AMCONSUL MADRAS

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 NEW DELHI 5362

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, IN
SUBJECT: JANATA WINS KARNAL BY-ELECTION -- BUT NOT BY MUCH

REF: NEW DELHI 4895

1. SUMMARY: JANATA CANDIDATE MOHINDER SINGH LATHAR WON THE KARNAL LOK SABHA BY-ELECTION IN HARYANA BY A MARGIN OF 18,000 VOTES, LESS THAN ONE-TENTH THE MARGIN OF VICTORY SCORED BY THE JANATA CANDIDATE IN WINNING THAT SEAT IN LAST YEAR'S GENERAL ELECTION. THE CONGRESS (I) CANDIDATE CAME IN A CLOSE SECOND, WITH THE OFFICIAL CONGRESS NOMINEE RUNNING A VERY DISTANT THIRD.
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DESPITE THE PREVALENCE OF SPECIAL CONDITIONS AND CIRCUMSTANCES IN INDIVIDUAL CONSTITUENCIES DURING THESE MID-TERM CONTESTS, BY-ELECTIONS IN INDIA OFTEN ARE SEEN AS SIGNALLING TRENDS OF NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE. IN ITS CONTEXT THE KARNAL RACE IS IMPORTANT IN TWO RESPECTS:(A) MRS. GANDHI ACHIEVED A LIMITED GAIN. ALTHOUGH JANATA RETAINED THE SEAT,

THE CREDITABLE SHOWING BY THE CONGRESS (I) CANDIDATE CLEARLY DEMONSTRATES THAT THE FORMER PM IS NOW A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH IN THE NORTH AS WELL AS IN THE SOUTH. (B) MRS. GANDHI HAS CONFIRMED THAT IN THE POPULAR MIND THERE ARE IN EFFECT ONLY TWO NATIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES, HERS AND THE JANATA. THE OFFICIAL CONGRESS NOW APPEARS TO BE AS MUCH A SPENT FORCE IN THE NORTH AS IT DOES IN MOST OF THE SOUTH. THE IMMEDIATE REACTION WITHIN JANATA CIRCLES WAS A SENSE OF RELIEF TEMPERED BY THE REALIZATION OF HOW CLOSE THE CONTEST WAS IN THE END. MRS. GANDHI IS UNLIKELY TO BE DETERRED BY THE NARROW LOSS OF HER CANDIDATE, NOR WILL SHE SLACKEN THE PACE OF HER AGGRESSIVE DRIVE AGAINST THE JANATA. THE RULING PARTY'S RESPONSE TO HER CHALLENGE IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE KARNAL BY-ELECTION IS STILL UNCLEAR AT THIS TIME. END SUMMARY.

2. JANATA CANDIDATE MOHINDER SINGH LATHAR HAS WON THE IMPORTANT BY-ELECTION FOR THE LOK SABHA SEAT IN THE KARNAL DISTRICT OF HARYANA. ACCORDING TO FINAL RESULTS LATHAR DEFEATED HIS NEAREST RIVAL, CONGRESS (I) CANDIDATE CHIRANJI LAL SHARMA, BY A MARGIN OF 18,381 VOTES. THE TALLY GIVES LATHAR 185,845 VOTES AND SHARMA 167,464. OFFICIAL CONGRESS CANDIDATE SHASHI BHUSHAN RAN A VERY DISTANT THIRD WITH JUST UNDER THREE THOUSAND VOTES. JANATA FIGURES EARLIER HAD CONCEDED CONFIDENTIAL

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THAT THE KARNAL CONTEST WOULD BE A TOUGH ONE, ESPECIALLY SINCE BRAHMINS AND HARIJANS, TRADITIONAL SUPPORTERS OF THE CONGRESS, COMPRISE A RELATIVELY HIGH PROPORTION OF THE ELECTORATE (SEE REFTEL). THE CONGRESS (I) CANDIDATE IS HIMSELF A BRAHMIN.

3. AS WE REPORTED IN REFTEL, CONGRESS (I) FIGURES HAD ALLEGED IN PRIVATE DURING THE CAMPAIGN THAT THE JANATA WOULD ENGAGE IN FOUL PLAY TO ENSURE THE VICTORY OF ITS CANDIDATE. NOT SURPRISINGLY, THIS THEME HAS BEEN REPEATED IN RECENT DAYS BY CONGRESS (I) LEADERS, INCLUDING MRS. GANDHI HERSELF. SHE HAS ALLEGED THAT HARIJANS WERE PREVENTED FROM VOTING. GIVEN THE CLOSENESS OF THE OUTCOME, SUCH ALLEGATIONS ARE INEVITABLE, AND THE CHIEF ELECTION COMMISSIONER TELLS US THAT HE EXPECTS THE CONGRESS (I) TO FILE AN ELECTION PETITION CHALLENGING THE RESULT WITHIN THE NEXT FEW DAYS. ON THE DEMAND OF THE CONGRESS (I) CANDIDATE A RECOUNT HAS ALREADY BEEN RUN IN ONE DISTRICT OF THE CONSTITUENCY. THE RESULT, HOWEVER, WAS A REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF VOTES POLLED BY SHARMA.

4. TRADITIONALLY, BY-ELECTIONS IN INDIA HAVE A

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OUT OF PROPORTION TO THEIR ACTUAL IMPORTANCE IN TERMS OF THE IMMEDIATE POLITICAL BALANCE OF POWER. THEY ARE OFTEN SEEN AS SIGNALLING TRENDS WHICH HAVE A NATIONAL, OR AT LEAST A REGIONAL SIGNIFICANCE. SUCH ASSESSMENTS ARE MADE DESPITE AWARENESS OF THE SPECIAL CONDITIONS AND CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH PREVAIL IN AN INDIVIDUAL CONSTITUENCY. THOSE WHO DO POORLY IN BY-ELECTIONS PUBLICLY STRESS THE INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER OF SUCH CONTESTS, AND WILL ALSO POINT OUT -- OFTEN CORRECTLY -- THAT THE VOTING PATTERN MIGHT WELL HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT HAD THE LOCAL ELECTORATE BEEN CASTING BALLOTS IN A GENERAL ELECTION. EVEN SO, THEY AS WELL AS OTHER POLITICIANS AND COMMENTATORS TEND TO TAKE THE RESULTS SERIOUSLY AND RECOGNIZE THE CONFIDENTIAL

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IMPACT THESE ISOLATED CONTESTS CAN HAVE ON THE BROADER POLITICAL CONVASS.

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5. IN THIS CONTEXT, THE KARNAL BY-ELECTION HAS BEEN IMPORTANT, AND HAS BEEN SEEN TO BE IMPORTANT, IN TWO MAJOR RESPECTS:

(A) ALTHOUGH JANATA HAS RETAINED KARNAL, MRS. GANDHI AND HER PARTY HAVE REGISTERED AT LEAST A LIMITED VICTORY. THE SEAT HAD BEEN WON JUST A YEAR AGO BY THE JANATA BY A MARGIN OF SOME 270,000 VOTES. THE DRASTIC REDUCTION OF THE JANATA MAJORITY SERVES AS A CLEAR DEMONSTRATION THAT MRS. GANDHI IS A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH IN THE NORTH AS WELL AS IN THE SOUTH. THIS IS NOT NECESSARILY TO SAY, AS THE FORMER PM'S SUPPORTERS AND SOME OBSERVERS MAINTAIN, THAT IN A GENERAL ELECTION THE CONGRESS (I) WOULD
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SCORE SIMILAR OR EVEN MORE IMPRESSIVE GAINS. BUT THE OUTCOME DOES SEEM TO US TO MEAN THAT MRS. GANDHI HAS PUT THE JANATA GOVERNMENT AND PARTY ON CLEAR NOTICE THAT THEY CAN NO LONGER CONFIDENTLY RELY ON THE HINDI HEARTLAND TO COUNTER THE STRENGTH SHE HAD ALREADY DEMONSTRATED IN THE SOUTH AND MAHARASHTRA IN THE FEBRUARY STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS. IF JANATA TENDED TO SHRUG OFF THEIR CHALLENGE EARLIER, IT SHOULD NOW KNOW THAT SHE IS AGAIN A FORMIDABLE CONTENDER ON A NATIONAL BASIS.

(B) PERHAPS AS IMPORTANT, THE FORMER PM CONFIRMED THAT IN THE POPULAR MIND THERE ARE IN EFFECT ONLY TWO NATIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES, HERS AND THE JANATA. THE CANDIDATE OF THE OFFICIAL CONGRESS CAME IN SO DISTANT A THIRD THAT THE PARTY NOW APPEARS AS MUCH A SPENT FORCE IN THE NORTH AS IT DOES IN MOST OF THE SOUTH. A CONGRESS GENERAL SECRETARY TOLD US THAT THE PARTY SHOULD NOT HAVE EVEN FIELDDED A CANDIDATE FOR THE SEAT, SINCE THE PROSPECTS FROM THE OUTSET WERE SO BLEAK. SHASHI BHUSHAN'S DRUBBING AT THE HANDS OF THE KARNAL VOTERS IS LIKELY TO FURTHER DEMORALIZE THE OFFICIAL CONGRESS AND HASTEN THE ALREADY CONSIDERABLE EROSION IN ITS RANKS THAT WE HAVE WITNESSED IN THE LAST TWO WEEKS. INDEED, OFFICIAL CONGRESS FIGURES SEEM TO BE ADOPTING A KIND OF BUNDER MENTALITY IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE BY-ELECTION. THEY CONCEDE THAT FURTHER DEFECTIONS TO MRS. GANDHI'S CAMP WILL OCCUR, AND THEY ARE NOW TALKING ABOUT THE OFFICIAL CONGRESS AS A SMALL CORE OF DIE-HARD ANTI-INDIRISTS CONSIGNED TO POLITICAL OBLIVION FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL YEARS. YET, THEY MAINTAIN THAT THEY WILL NOT

COMPROMISE THEIR PRINCIPLES AND WILL NOT RECONCILE THEM-
SELVES TO THE REALITY THAT MRS. GANDHI'S IS SWIFTLY BE-
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COMING THE "REAL" CONGRESS.

6. CURIOUSLY, LATHER'S VICTORY IN KARNAL HAS NONETHE-
LESS BEEN SOMETHING OF A SHOT IN THE ARM FOR THE JANATA.
SENIOR FIGURES IN THE RULING PARTY WERE PRIVATELY CON-
CERNED THAT THEIR CANDIDATE MIGHT LOSE. THE LAST-MINUTE
ROUND OF CAMPAIGNING BY SEVERAL JANATA MINISTERS MAY
HAVE TURNED THINGS AROUND IN THE HOME STRETCH. FOREIGN
MINISTER VAJPAYEE IS ESPECIALLY CREDITED FOR HIS
EFFECTIVENESS AND CROWD APPEAL IN THE FINAL DAYS
BEFORE APRIL 2. THE IMMEDIATE REACTION IN JANATA
CIRCLES WAS A SENSE OF RELIEF COUPLED WITH THE BE-
LIEF THAT MRS. GANDHI'S BUILDING MOMENTUM HAS BEEN
MOMENTARILY STYMIED. YET, THIS SENSE OF RELIEF IS
TEMPERED BY THE REALIZATION THAT THE JANATA'S MARGIN
OF VICTORY WAS LESS THAN ONE-TENTH OF WHAT IS CANDI-
DATE HAD SCORED JUST ONE YEAR AGO.

7. MRS. GANDHI IS UNLIKELY TO BE DETERRED BY THE
NARROW LOSS OF HER CANDIDATE. SHE WILL NOT SLACKEN
THE PACE OF HER AGGRESSIVE DRIVE AGAINST JANATA. SHE
HAS COME A LONG WAY FROM RAE BAREILLY AND SHE KNOWS IT.
UPCOMING BY-ELECTIONS, BEGINNING WITH A LOK SABHA
CONTEST IN AZAMGARH, U.P. IN EARLY MAY, WILL PROBABLY
FIND HER AGAIN IN THE THICK OF THINGS, BRINGING HER
FAMILIAR MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE IN THE CONVICTION THAT THEY
WILL EVENTUALLY RETURN HER TO POWER.

8. WHAT LONGER TERM EFFECT THE ELECTION WILL HAVE ON
JANATA IS, OF COURSE, STILL UNCLEAR AT THIS TIME. THE
RACE TOOK PLACE AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF INCREASINGLY
BITTER AND MORE PUBLIC BICKERING AMONG THE SENIOR PARTY
LEADERSHIP OVER A VARIETY OF ISSUES, INCLUDING THE LONG-
DELAYED MEMBERSHIP DRIVE AND ORGANIZATIONAL ELECTIONS
(SEE NEW DELHI A-72). THE PARTY'S TOP FIGURES ARE
NOW SEEKING TO THRASH OUT THEIR PERSONAL AND
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POLITICAL CONTROVERSIES, AND WE WILL BE REPORTING
FURTHER ON THIS LATER IN THE WEEK. THE OUTCOME
OF THEIR HIGH-LEVEL MEETINGS MAY PROVIDE SOME CLUE
ABOUT THEIR WILLINGNESS AND ABILITY TO PUT THEIR HOUSES

--BOTH GOVERNMENT AND PARTY -- IN ORDER TO DEAL WITH
THE CHANGES IN THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE THAT THE
KARNAL RESULTS HAVE REVEALED, AND THE FURTHER
CHARGES THEY ARE LIKELY TO PROMPT.
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